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Online identity crisis

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Online identity crisis: Real ID on the World of Warcraft forums

by Anne-Mette Albrechtslund

Abstract

In July 2010, Activision Blizzard announced that the Real ID system was going to be implemented on the official World of Warcraft forums, meaning that players would be required to identify themselves with their real names to be able to post on the forums. The plans were withdrawn only a few days later because of the overwhelming negative response from players. This article analyzes examples of players' responses on the forums and, having identified central themes concerning identity and sociality in this online setting, explores possible reasons why anonymity is so important to the player community.

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1. Introduction

On 6 July 2010, video game publishers/developers Activision Blizzard announced on the official World of Warcraft ("WoW") forums that in the future players would be required to identify themselves with their real names to be able to post on these forums. This would be an extension of the Real ID feature already implemented in-game, an optional service where players are able to connect to each other as "Real ID friends" by exchanging real-life names (which are then shown alongside their character names in the game interface). This makes it easier for instance to stay in contact with friends who are playing on different servers. By extending the Real ID system to the forums, including mandatory use of real-life names, the expressed hope was that "[r]emoving the veil of anonymity typical to online dialogue will contribute to a more positive forum environment, promote constructive conversations, and connect the Blizzard community in ways they haven't been connected before" [1]. In other words, the main purpose of having players post with their real names was to a) eliminate trolling and general bad behavior in the forum discussions; and, b) allowing players to take their relationships beyond the game and into other spheres of the Internet and off-line life.

However, the announcement led to a flood of negative response on the forums as well as on various player-driven Internet communities and sites dedicated to WoW. On the official forums, the original thread beginning with the developers' announcement has a total of 49,896 replies and has since been referred to by forum posters as "the legendary 2,495 pages" [2]. A few days after the initial thread, on 9 July, Activision Blizzard withdrew their plans in a new thread on the forums. This post was signed Mike Morhaime, president of Blizzard and one of the original developers of WoW, and stated: "We've been constantly monitoring the feedback you've given us, as well as internally discussing your concerns about the use of real names on our forums. As a result of those discussions, we've decided at this time that real names will not be required for posting on official Blizzard forums" [3]. This course of events was generally received as a great victory for the player community [4].

2. Approach: Research question and methodology

There are several interesting issues at stake here and many ways to study them. A central issue is the problem of anonymous vs. real life identities in the online community. On the official WoW forums, as is the traditional way with Internet message boards, users post anonymously, identified here by (one of) their WoW character names, guilds, and servers. Requiring the use of real names in forums would surely mean a groundbreaking change in the use and communication practices of the forums — a change, which the game company obviously viewed as positive, but was negatively received by the majority of the players posting responses.

The purpose of this study is to answer the central research question: *Why is anonymity important for this kind of online community?* This is carried out through an exploration of the process of forming and negotiating identity as it is reflected in the WoW players' writings about the ways they wish to engage with each other as well as the relationship that they wish to uphold with Activision Blizzard. Gaming culture often entails a great deal of "expressive productivity" (Wirman, 2007) — practices where players create stories, comics, machinima, etc. based on the game. This productivity seems to be a common way for players to "circulate feelings about the game to each other and reflect on their own experience" [5]. This applies to the writings on the WoW forums as well, and while I consider all types of posts in my analysis, I focus especially on the many posts in which players produce small, concentrated storylines or dramas which fictionalize the Real ID situation. I analyze these narrative framings of events and experiences connected to the issue and, through this analysis, identify some recurring themes dealing with online identity.

The theoretical perspective, which guides my approach, is rooted in the humanities with particular inspiration from narrative research (understood as a broad interdisciplinary field) and literary theory, especially Paul Ricoeur's literary hermeneutics. This entails a view on the text production by users of social media, in this case, members of an online community, as a "mimesis" of human experience. In literary theory, the term *mimesis* (a Greek word mostly translated as "representation of reality") is often invoked to discuss matters of fictional representation (see Gebauer and Wulf, 1995). In Ricoeur's use of the concept, *mimesis* designates a constructive activity, resulting in a representation which is "something completely contrary to a copy of some preexisting reality and [...] instead [...] a creative imitation" [6]. Following this, we might say that when people write about themselves and their experiences online, they are not merely conveying facts and opinions, they are actively constructing (or participating in a construction of) meaning.

Ricoeur uses the concept of *mimesis* to describe how the experience of life is symbolically mediated, and how we use narratives to structure and make sense of this experience. He calls this "narrative identity" which means that we continually form our own identity through storytelling and emplotment, both through our own storytelling and those of the cultural texts we meet (Ricoeur, 1991). When WoW players engage in the Real ID debate at their central meeting place, the official forums, their writings contribute to a collective construction and negotiation of meaning regarding a) identity at the intersection between online and off-line, anonymous and identified, and fictional and real; and, b) the nature of the relationship between players themselves and between players and the corporate entity authorizing the existence of the community.



3. Material: Threads of protest and reflection

My central material for this case study consists of two substantial threads on the official (North American [7]) WoW forums — the first one titled "Upcoming changes to forums" containing the announcement of the Real ID plans (which I shall refer to as "Thread 1") and the other called "Regarding real names in forums" containing the retraction of the plans ("Thread 2"). Although these forums are only one of the platforms where players write about WoW and the issue has been discussed elsewhere, e.g., on blogs and unofficial forums related to WoW, the two threads are selected as case material because of their central position as reference and meeting points in the general discussion of the issue. Comparing the two, Thread 1 might be seen as the town square, as it were, where protesters gather to voice their opposition, and Thread 2 the more withdrawn public space of a central pub where people reflect and discuss on the events that just took place. In both threads, though, the inclination towards dramatizing the situation seems equally present.

Taking a closer look at the way the players express their thoughts about the issue in these threads, a certain perspective, and therefore a certain way of framing the debate, can be found to be typical. Although the forum thread as a textual genre is typically highly dialogical, designed for questions, answers and discussions, the two long threads I focus on here appear more list-like, in the sense that while there are of course discussions and disagreements about the Real ID issue, the main impression is that of a long series of responses that share the same outlook on things. Throughout the players' writings certain characteristic phrases and metaphors are used to describe the different actors involved, attributing certain meanings and

values to these. There are many variations, of course, but there are certainly some positions that are reiterated throughout the threads.

The very first response posted after the initial announcement of the plans for implementing Real ID (Thread 1) clearly sets the mood for what is to follow:

"Okay this is a TERRIBLE idea. [...] I know alot of people are going to just simply STOP using the forums when you do this, you're not bringing us together, you're making us all too afraid to interect with eachother out of fear of identity theft and the like. So now people who want to add me to their friend list will have my login Email, my real name, etc. ... ARE YOU KIDDING ME?! [...] please Please PLEASE don't do this! I guarantee you'll be tearing apart your community more than bringing us together. If this change goes through, it better not be retroactive to all previous posts, otherwise you better delete all previous posts ever made. Goodbye WoW forums, hello MMO Champion forums, the untarnished warcraft forum." (Tholian, 6 July 2010) [8]

This post sums up some of the main issues that the players worry about in Thread 1, expressing a general concern that players will not post freely anymore and therefore not contribute to upholding the WoW community by fear of identity theft, of being too exposed, and of possible account hackers. The use of caps and repetitions here ("please Please PLEASE") contribute to the sense of urgency and shock typical of the many negative responses in the thread.

Other even more emotionally charged posts express fear on behalf of female players. Many already experience harassment regularly when identifying themselves as real-life females to others during in-game communications. The biggest worry in this category is the danger of being physically harmed by unhinged players (as incidents of video game-related violence are reported in the media from time to time). A poster tells about her off-life identity as a 21-year-old disabled woman with a unique name and previous experiences of harassment:

"By revealing my name, you can now find out everything about me. What does that do to a 21-year-old disabled woman? It makes me a target. Now, obviously not everyone is going to go insane and start going on WoW murdering sprees, but I have already had some pretty unkind things said about me when people do find out. I'm not going to stand for this. I will not yet again be taunted and harassed by ignorant, uncaring jerks, just because they're able to see who I am." (Animahli, 7 July 2010) [9]

The two posts above are typical examples of players worrying about the impact the changes will have on the social fabric of the game, and it is clear that anonymity is perceived as a basic necessity to ensure the mutual trust of players. I will expand on these issues in the following analysis of examples from the forum threads.



4. The epic battle of the forums

4.1. The critical event

In narrative research as well as in online ethnographic studies [10], it is common to structure one's study around a critical or key event, because when studying such an event occurring in a community or culture, the changes in self-understanding this might bring about can also reveal understandings which are normally only tacitly known (Webster and Mertova, 2007). The critical event can be seen as a breach of what narrative research sometimes calls the "canonical script" (Bruner, 1991), the normally expected condition or action in any given situation. The announcement about implementing Real ID on the forums can certainly be seen as such a "breach event", which both disrupts the status quo of the normal understanding of communication on the forums and prompts the articulation of this understanding.

While there are plenty of responses that are positive to the plans for Real ID in the forums, the amount of protests in the thread is overwhelming. As mentioned above, the general negative reaction on the forums (as well as in the blogosphere and on other WoW related Web sites) led to Blizzard Activision, represented by Blizzard CEO Mike Morhaime, declaring a retraction of the plans in Thread 2 a few days later. The following post (number 3,568 in Thread 2) is typical of the joyful responses to this:

"awww, but we almost made it to 50,000 posts!
epic battle, anyway ...

Woot.” (Astralite, 9 July 2010) [[11](#)]

The reference to Thread 1 (“50,000 posts”) as the main scene of the “epic battle” is evident here. This framing of the problematic situation a battle between the players as a community vs. the game company Activision Blizzard trying to force unwanted changes on this community pervades the players’ discourse about the Real ID issue in the threads (as well as related blog posts, etc.).

The term “epic” has, of course, now earned a spot as a standard, widely used idiom in Internet culture. Its hyperbolic (and, some would claim, often flippant) use in this context originates in games like WoW, where the word designates the high and rare quality of certain in-game items (as in “I finally got my epic mount”). The term is of course featured heavily in WoW because it fits well with the heroic fantasy setting of the game, but use of it is expanded to generally mean something or someone being “great”, “amazing”, etc. (as in “this guild is just epic”). As could be expected, the “battle” that took place on the WoW forums about the Real ID issue had hardly finished before it was also dubbed “epic” — and Blizzard Activision’s plans indeed deemed an “epic fail” — as one of the first responses in Thread 1 states: “Can I say it? Epic Fail” (Puntable, 6 July 2010) [[12](#)]. This article also frames the event in an “epic” perspective, meaning that the two threads analyzed here are seen as the multi-voiced, open-ended discourse telling the story of the epic Real ID battle.

4.2. “We, the players”

One of the first things to notice about the rhetoric of the Real ID threads is that players repeatedly refer to themselves as a collective, unified “we”, especially in the posts characterized by the use of dramatic language. Discussion posts in online forums are, of course, frequently written from an individual perspective, often directly addressing other individual statements, but in these two threads at least, use of the first-person plural is widespread. One of the first posts in Thread 2, responding to the official retraction of the Real ID plans, thus simply states: “[W]hoa, we did it?” (Zerve, 9 July 2010) [[13](#)]. This “we” clearly makes a distinction between the players posting on the forums and the other frequent posters, the Blizzard employees who function as community managers and are known as “Blues” because their posts appear in blue text. The Blues are generally highly regarded on the forums and serve as forum moderators as well as mediators, passing on official information and announcements from Blizzard while picking up player feedback for the developers (and being active WoW players themselves). However, by employing the “we” in this way, the poster rhetorically takes up the position of spokesperson for the player community, excluding the Blues, who as Blizzard employees were obliged to defend the Real ID plans, even if a few of them were also reportedly critical of the plans [[14](#)]. Except for the two official announcements launching Thread 1 and 2, the Blues are the only representatives of Blizzard’s perspective on the matter and they do not post more than usual (for instance, in Thread 1, there are 30 blue posts out of 49,896).

The conflation between the individual player and the collective even brings about a bit of self-conscious humor in the 1661st post in Thread 2:

“It heartens us (me, at least) to hear that you accept feedback of all kinds and remain close to the fanbase at large. We (I, anyway) thank you for addressing our concerns on this matter in a timely fashion, and really do appreciate the time and effort you’re putting in here. From us (me again) to everyone at Blizzard, thanks.”
(Dargun, 9 July 2010) [[15](#)]

From a narratological perspective, the “we”—narrative complicates the usually clear divide between narrator, author, audience and character: “So is it the whole group speaking in unison, like the chorus in Greek tragedy, or one speaker only? And if this speaker is one, is he an authorized spokesperson for the group? ‘We’-narratives may serve as tools for constructing a group’s sense of cohesion and identity, but mental access by the we-narrator is necessarily curtailed” (Margolin, 2010). The complicated communication situation is apparent when we study the fictional dramas and stories players create to express how they experience the crisis. In the 11.230th post in Thread 1, a player dramatizes the situation in this way:

“(After a long and epic battle >2k pages in this thread)
Players: It’s over Blizzard we have the high ground!
Blizzard: You underestimate my POWER!
Players: Don’t try it.
Blizzard: Ahhhhhhhh!
(Blizzard launches RealID on the forums and loses 1/3 of its customers. What’s left of its stock tumbles down the rocky slope)
Players: YOU WERE THE CHOSEN ONE! It was said that you would be better than greedy corporate giants, NOT JOIN THEM! Bring high quality games to the gaming community, not betray them after 15 years of customer loyalty!
Blizzard: I HATE YOU!!!!
Players: You were my brother Blizzard. I loved you.”
(Ateyakee, 8 July 2010) [[16](#)]

While there is no doubt that the pathos in posts of this sort are also meant humorously, as part of the general tone on the forums, the drama expresses some rather serious emotions. Framing the debate about Real ID as an “epic battle” means, first of all, that the actors taking part are categorized into two opposing forces: the Players and Blizzard. Reminiscent of a Greek tragedy both in style and theme, the drama portrays the disruption of a loving, trusting relationship (“Players” and “Blizzard” as brothers) by one sibling’s betrayal. Implying that there was a time before Real ID, when Players had trusted Blizzard to be above the “greedy corporate giants” at large in the games industry, the drama mourns the loss of this trust as Blizzard has decided to use its powers for evil, so to speak.

The discrete shift towards the end of the drama, where the Players shed the self-referring “we” of the first line in favor of the first-person pronoun “I”, can be seen as an indication that the author identifies with this side of the battle. In other words, the collapse of individual and collective voices in the story means that the diegetic character “Players” becomes a vehicle for a direct message to Blizzard from the author, who at the same time takes on the authority of spokesperson for the whole community of players. Posts like this are part of the process of articulating a community identity by drawing on storytelling techniques and genres. I will return to a discussion of the workings of narrative identity in this context, but let us first take a closer look at how the different actors involved in the Real ID “battle” are characterized and positioned by the players in the forum threads.

4.3. Heroes and villains

The above drama by Ateyakee expresses a sense of betrayal in a relationship that used to be built on trust (or even love) which is a returning theme of many posts in both Thread 1 and 2. If we see the Real ID crisis and its resolution as a story told (mainly) by the players in these threads, a structure identifying the good and bad characters are quickly visible: Blizzard is assigned the role of the villain, and the player community plays the role of the victim-turned-hero fighting to restore status quo. This tendency is naturally most apparent in Thread 1, where there is a sense of relatively collective protest, while Thread 2 in general seems more like a collective sigh of relief and includes a large number of “thank you” posts. However, wariness is discernible in this second thread, with many posters still expressing the general feeling of betrayal. Thus, the ninth response in Thread 2 states: “So long as this remains true [being able to keep relationships anonymous], I am satisfied for now. But I do not know if I will ever truly trust you again, Blizzard. Perhaps that is a lesson worth learning out of all of this” (Deminimis, 9 July 2010) [17].

In the post containing the official retraction of the Real ID plans, the wording of the central message: “[W]e’ve decided *at this time* that real names will not be required for posting on official Blizzard forums” (Mike Morhaime, 9 July 2010, my italics), seems to be a special cause of concern for the player community. One player thus critically examines the statement: “Does it mean that two days ago this was planned, but at this time you’ve come to realize how unpopular it is and will never implement it in the future, or does it mean that you weren’t expecting this united outcry, and have tabled the idea for now?” (quoted by Ardric [18], 9 July 2010). The general feeling of wariness is manifest in the following post (no. 3,560 in Thread 2), reflecting on the outcome of the “epic battle”:

“And the dust settles ...
Though a great battle has been fought, the celebrations have begun, but the temporarily defeated menace only retreats, for a day, month, or year, nobody knows. We are enjoying our victory, but we must not let our guard down. Two things, one great, one terrible, have occurred. We proven that we can, by sheer volume of opinion, influence blizzard. But we also have proven that blizzard can implement horrible things, things that can easily break the game, or severely cripple it. While we celebrate the first victory over Blizzard, we must also monitor actions carefully, and allow no new threats to pass unnoticed. Raging signature has thankfully been removed due to acti-blizz using their long forgotten common sense.” (Shadowsteal, 9 July 2010) [19]

Shadowsteal here expresses a feeling of broken trust, which persists even though “we celebrate the first victory over Blizzard” and warns that “we must not let our guard down”. The “defeated menace” designates the threat of Real ID on the forums, while the villain issuing this threat to the community is of course “blizzard”/“Blizzard” — however, in the player’s signature (probably not created at the same time as the main text) the culprit is referred to as “acti-blizz” — meaning Activision Blizzard. The distinctions between “Blizzard”, “Activision Blizzard” and “Activision” in the forum threads are quite significant when it comes to the formulation and definition of the identity of the player community in relation to the developers, and I will give some examples in the following.

However, to understand the distinction players sometimes make between these company units, a bit of background information might be necessary at this point. While Blizzard Entertainment (founded in 1991) remains an independent game developer, a merger in 2008 with Activision, another successful video-game publishing company, means that Blizzard is now a division of the company Activision Blizzard, which is headed by the former CEO of Activision, Bobby

Kotick. Kotick, seen as the representative of Activision, has become quite a controversial figure among gamers. After the Activision Blizzard merger, several game titles were dropped due to a business strategy focusing on developing games, which, in Kotick's words, "have the potential to be exploited every year on every platform with clear sequel potential and have the potential to become \$100 million franchises" (Totilo, 2008). Critics in the gaming community have been uncomfortable with Kotick's business jargon and worry that this strategy comes at the cost of risk-taking — and "creativity and originality" — in game development [20].

It is not surprising that this image of Kotick is repeated on the WoW forums — not least in the angry protests found in Thread 1. One player even refers to "Satan Kotick" (Cutiepie, 8 July 2010), fully in line with the demonizing portraits of Kotick circulating on the Internet. Another player's posting signature is a large ASCII art reading: "BLAME KOTICK" (Diesle, 8 July 2010), preceded by a drama similar to Ateyakee's above:

"Actiblizz employee says: Blizzard ...
Activision says: Glad you could make it, Blizzard.
Blizzard says: Watch your tone with me, boy. You may be the major shareholder, but I'm still your superior as a company!
Activision says: As if I could forget. Listen, Blizzard, there's something about the trolls you should know ...
Activision says: Oh, no. We're too late. These posters have all been infected! They may look fine now, but it's just a matter of time before they turn into /b/ers!
Blizzard says: What?
Activision says: All these posters names must be shown.
Blizzard says: How can you even consider that? There's got to be some other way.
Arthas says: Damn it, Blizzard! As your future boss, I order you expose these forums!
Blizzard says: you are not my boss yet, boy! Nor would I obey that command even if you were!
Activision says: Then I must consider this an act of misconduct.
Blizzard says: Misconduct? Have you lost your mind, Activision?
Activision says: Have I? Blizzard, by my right of succession and the sovereignty of the gaming industry, I hereby relieve you of your command and suspend your developers from service.
Player Base says: Activision! You can't just —
Activision says: It's done! Those of you who have the will to proceed with this idea, come into my office! The rest of you ... get out of my sight!
Playerbase and Blizzard walk away
Blizzard says: You've just crossed a terrible threshold, Activision.
Activision says: Playerbase?
Playerbase says: I'm sorry, Activision. I can't watch you do this." (quoted by Diesle, 8 July 2010) [21]

What is basically told here is the story of "Blizzard" and "Playerbase" standing together against the devious "Activision"/"Arthas" (the latter is a major villain in the fictional WoW universe) who, in a *coup d'état* of sorts, takes command and implements its evil plans: "All these posters names must [sic] be shown". The "Actiblizz employee" who introduces Blizzard to Activision in the beginning reminds us that there already exists a formal union between these two, but they are immediately represented as two separate characters — Blizzard the elder superior ("Watch your tone with me, boy") and Activision/Arthas the successor-in-waiting ("As your future boss ... "). "Playerbase" is clearly loyal to Blizzard, like an army standing behind its old general. When Blizzard issues the warning, "You've just crossed a terrible threshold", and then unleashes the force of the playerbase, the threshold in question seems to be that between the interests of the players and the interests of corporate power.

The position of the hero is occupied by Blizzard, at least until Playerbase shows up and declares war on the villain. Blizzard and Playerbase then become one in their fight against Activision, although the players are represented as the character who takes the crucial action that moves the plot to its resolution.

The same type of relation between the players and Blizzard is expressed in one of the relieved posts of Thread 2:

"Players, YOU saved the day. For some of you to cancel after having played for 5 years is something most people even in epic gear couldn't handle. Blizzard, you truly are awesome. I hope this doesn't create a backlash from Activision and Bobby Kotex [sic] for this decision." (Hadassalu, 9 July 2010) [22]

We see that while the players and Blizzard are united against Activision in the above quotes, the individual player and the collective in Ateyakee's drama quoted in the previous section constitute the heroic subject, as the "we" and "I" are conflated in their fight against the villain, which is Blizzard in this case. The fight against the exposure of players' real names thus remains the central plot in these two dramas, but the identification of heroes and villains shift through different representational structures.

However, the demand to keep anonymity for posters on the WoW forums remains the direct message from most of the players posting in the threads, and this demand seems to be motivated by a fear of having one's off-line, "real" identity exposed before other players and before one's everyday social environment (particularly work relations). It might seem paradoxical that the players are united in a battle against the implementation of a "law" which claims to bring them closer together, but the players clearly depend on anonymity to engage in the WoW community and the game itself. In the next section I explore the motives behind this dependency on anonymity.



5. Identity crisis in the online community

5.1. Online community or social network?

In Thread 2, a poster thanks Blizzard for listening to the players and then states: "I did not sign up to play World of Farmville on Battlebook" (Ranoe, 9 July 2010) [23].

"Battlebook" contains a reference to Battle.net, an online gaming service which includes Blizzard's games and which is the platform for the official WoW forums. In May 2010 (two months before Real ID on the forums was brought up), it was announced that Battle.net would be integrated with Facebook, meaning among other things that players would be able to add friends from their Facebook accounts to their in-game friends lists, "to enhance the social-entertainment experience for our players", as it was stated by Blizzard (quoted by Citizen, 2010).

Farmville, which Ranoe refers to in the above quote, is often invoked in the WoW community to exemplify easy, casual games which, unlike WoW, are seen as "mindless entertainment where you don't have to concentrate or pay attention" (as the player Cinderfist states in a December 2010 forum post [24]). In fact, Facebook — and the casual games supported by Facebook — are generally perceived as antithetical to WoW (in the same way that many players of Everquest (a popular MMO preceding and often compared to WoW) were sceptical of mere social "chatting, hanging out, and general undirected play" [25]). Not surprisingly, the integration with Facebook was controversial and is closely linked to the issue of Real ID on the forums, as is evident in the repeated references to Facebook in the Real ID discussions and in the two threads analyzed here.

The perceived contrasts between the WoW community and Facebook bear witness to a much discussed distinction between community and network. In the early days of the World Wide Web, when users gathered in newsgroups, message boards, etc., it was quickly noted that these online groups, although seldom physically co-present, were actually communities (see Rheingold, 1993, and Baym, 2007). The turn of the millenium saw a rise in a different kind of online social platform which was driven by individual social relations, a development summarized by boyd and Ellison (2007) in the following way: "Early public online communities [...] were structured by topics or according to topical hierarchies, but social network sites are structured as personal (or 'egocentric') networks, with the individual at the center of their own community". This distinction is modified and sometimes contested elsewhere in academic literature on gaming and Internet culture. For instance, Taylor uses the terms 'social network' and 'community' almost coincidingly, describing different configurations of the social life relating to the game [26], while Baym writes about a new form of "distributed community" where fans "build community through a network of sites" [27].

Nevertheless, the distinction between community and social network does seem to live on in Internet culture in general and in WoW culture especially. In the context of the official WoW forums and the Real I.D. debate, players repeatedly articulate an understanding of themselves as being a community. This is evident in the quotes above and in a typical quote such as this (from Thread 2): "Thank you for listening to us, Blizzard! I'm glad that you took our concerns to heart and it's good to get a letter from Mr. Morhaime himself, showing that everyone inside Blizzard pays attention to the community" (Colmack, 9 July 2010) [28].

This self-understanding is obviously most clearly defined when relative to something or someone else — and in this case, Blizzard and Facebook both work as counterpoints. However, this does not necessarily mean that WoW players are not also using Facebook (there is even a Facebook group named "Say No to WoWBook" [29]) — but the threads show a great discomfort with the attempt to blend these two kinds of social spheres. We might understand this better if we explore how the creative freedom made possible by anonymity affects identity and sociality in the WoW community.

5.2. Real, anonymous and playful identities

What becomes apparent when reading through the players' posts in Threads 1 and 2 is that there is a general understanding that meaningful, trusting interaction between members of the community is dependent on anonymity. This need for anonymity is often explained as fear of harassment from other players, fear of reciprocations from external social environments (mainly workplaces), and a distrust towards Activision Blizzard as a business. It is not possible to identify a uniformly perceived enemy or danger associated with using real names on the forums, as I have pointed out in the analysis above. But anonymity remains the shared, highly-valued quality for the users of the WoW forums, and the fears of harassment, etc. may only be a surface explanation of their strong, collective reaction against the Real ID plans.

In one of the more elaborate responses in Thread 1, a player makes the connection between anonymity and identity play (while also sustaining the Facebook apprehension mentioned above):

"I don't worry about stalkers. I'm a shape shifting ninja [...]. The Real ID thing is more than about privacy. It is about Blizzard losing touch with their users. There is a definitive move towards making Battlenet like Facebook. [...] I know tons of WoW players who despise social networking. They wouldn't go to Blizzcon if Blizz paid all their expenses and offered free dancing girls. (I'd go for the dancing girls!). They do not play to 'forge real-life' friendships. They play WoW to play a game. Yes, they've made some friends along the way. But that doesn't mean they want to be their friend outside of the game, or even know who they really are. [...]
World of Warcraft is a game. For many (myself included) this is an escape. Here I am not a frazzled, overworked, stressed computer programmer. I am 'Moo', laid back, funny, and oft distracted healer. I like being 'Moo'." (Mooicusrex, 8 July 2010) [30]

Stating that many WoW players are not playing for social networking, but as an "escape", that they do not want to know who their in-game friends "really are", Mooicusrex maintains the clear division between everyday life reality and the WoW experience which motivates the general resistance towards Real ID. But his post suggests that the key problem for the players might have as much to do with the way Real ID would radically change the framework for identity construction within the WoW community. After all, the danger of serious harassment relating to in-game relationships remains a relatively rare worst-case scenario, if we assume that participating in online gaming — or just online communication — does not make a person any more likely to harass or attack someone else [31].

In fact, anonymity should not necessarily be understood as keeping one's identity "secret". As Bonnie Nardi (2010) points out in her recent anthropological study of WoW, many players already know each other's real-life identity and see the game as "an extension of their existing social life" [32]. Likewise, the boundaries between what is perceived as work and what is perceived as play does not necessarily correspond to a boundary between everyday life and game activity, a distinction often discussed in game research [33]. Remarkably, it seems that players were not particularly unhappy with the in-game Real ID system (which is of course also optional) as mentioned in the introduction. Nevertheless, just as "[p]layers cross the threshold out of ordinary life to engage in [...] performative activity in a game space" [34] when actually playing WoW, so they are communicating on the forums under circumstances which allow as well as demand some form of imaginative identity construction.

For example, the name a player chooses to go by tends to be meaningful to them, no matter how silly or irreverent it is. According to Hagström (2008), it can be upsetting for players to be forced to change their name (Blizzard can ask a player to do this for various reasons), because the name is most often the only marker players have of recognizing each other. In fact, players more often than not only interact with each other in the game via chat, while their animated characters are often acting on their own in different locations of the vast game world. This is also mentioned by many players in the two threads. Echoing Turkle's (2004) descriptions of self-representation on the early Internet as created only through text, Hagström writes of the distress one player experienced when forced to change his name: "On the Internet, he is his name, and only his name: It is his identity" [35].

Hagström points out that role players do not seem to create particularly different character names, although they may take the naming process more seriously than non-role players [36]. The importance of naming illustrates its value as part of the experience of playing WoW. While only a minority of WoW players practice actual roleplay, *i.e.*, create characters with a consistent lifestory in the game, all players can be said to mediate their presence through one or more characters from the game. Taylor (2006) has shown this to be the case in relation to EverQuest as well, pointing out how the game character — which she refers to as the avatar — is a "key artifact through which users not only know others and the world around them, but themselves. Avatars are objects that not only represent people in the virtual world, but influence and propel the formation of identity and relationships" [37].

Whether understood as the animated in-game character or the forum pseudonym, the anonymous avatar should not necessarily be seen as a direct reference to the off-line person,

but as a vehicle for creating something new. So we might understand the avatar as not just a mirror image of the off-line person playing/writing, but rather a representation referring simultaneously to that person's everyday reality and to something purely fictional, which has no direct model in reality. Ricoeur explains that fiction's role is to

"suspend meaning in the neutralized atmosphere to which one could give the name of the dimension of fiction. In this state of non-engagement we try new ideas, new values, new ways of being-in-the-world"
[38]

Instead of bringing players closer together in a more expanded social network, using Real ID on the forums would mean that players would lose the benefits of this "neutralized atmosphere".

We might say that the Real ID issue shows how players create fictional representations in at least two ways. First, they represent themselves anonymously, in the form of game characters and pseudonyms for posting on the forums, both of which are potentially "new ways of being-in-the-world". Second, when writing on the forums about the proposed changes, players often launch into narratives which enable them to give form and structure to what seems to be a confusion of emotions and loyalties. Hence, the first point explains why the players reacted so strongly over the loss of anonymity — and thus the freedom from the constraints of everyday life — in their gaming experience. The second factor may explain why these reactions dramatized the situation.

6. Discussion

I would like to briefly remark on some of the issues brought about by the subject and method of this paper. First of all, it should be stressed that the purpose of this article was not to measure or categorize the attitudes of the players towards the Real ID plans. To achieve that, a different range of methods, such as surveys and interviews, should have been employed. Instead, I sought to answer the basic research question guiding this study — *Why is anonymity important for this kind of online community?* — by looking at text spontaneously created by players in the course of the Real ID "battle". I suggest that this is a way of regarding the forum posts as meaning-making in practice. While we —as researchers or fellow players — will never know the original intentions, emotions or situations of specific writers posting on the forums, the text itself remains the only tangible material that we all have access to and can interpret.


However, divorcing text from its author completely is only possible from a strictly theoretical perspective. It seems particularly unproductive in relation to studying online communication. According to Bassett and O'Riordan, Internet research needs to "find a way of acknowledging the hybridity of the Internet, acknowledging that the texts it supports are neither virtual selves nor objects completely distinct from those who write them" [39]. Narrative research, a strongly interdisciplinary academic field, has taught us that while it is important not to conflate the text with its author, they are also linked in complex ways [40]. In fact, my approach to the case presented in this paper is motivated by an ambition to understand exactly this link: What does the text mean, how does it work, and what does it do in the context in which it is produced?

The research perspective also influences considerations on research ethics. Determining what rights and responsibilities the researcher has when studying online user-produced material is always a delicate process. In the case of the WoW forums, the public nature of the site and the very anonymity that players fought to keep in the Real ID "battle" makes ethical considerations relatively straightforward. Content on the official WoW forums is openly accessible (no membership login required), and all posters use pseudonyms. Hence, there does not seem to be any breach of confidentiality or intrusion of privacy in quoting directly from the forums. If Real ID had in fact been implemented on the forums, using material from the forums would have required a more sensitive approach, most likely including a re-anonymizing of the posters' names.

7. Conclusion

The epic Real ID battle prompts articulations of the self-understanding of the community and demonstrates the ways identity work is carried out in a digitally mediated environment. When we look at the situation of WoW players, they are challenged by the Real ID announcement to consider how playing the game is meaningful in their lives in general and for their social relations in particular. While there are certainly many different ways of being a WoW player, the discussions concerning Real ID on the forums point to a general discomfort with the blending of spheres that set different conditions for identifying oneself and socializing with each other. Players' responses suggest that the resistance to Real ID may have more to do with

fears of losing the freedom of anonymity to create and play with identities than with a desire to keep one's real-life identity hidden.

Further research on this topic could lead in many directions. Obviously, the case of the Real ID "battle" is significant for anyone working on organization and design of online groups and communities, and for anyone studying the relationship between users and producers in the age of the Internet. My own ambition is to continue to explore the connection between anonymity and creativity in online settings, and more specifically, I plan to carry out comparative studies of circumstances of identity formation on different sites, *e.g.*, by following selected users across sites such as the official WoW forums, the more intimate guild forums, and Facebook. Studying the different modes of self-representation and social interaction on such sites could be a way to answer the broader question implicated by the subject of this article: What does "real-life identity" mean in the context of the various possibilities of self-representation on the Web? 

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Notes

1. The original announcement was posted at <http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=25712374700&sid=1> but was since edited. However, it has been quoted in full on other Web sites, *e.g.*, <http://kokugamer.com/2010/07/06/battle-nets-realid-reveals-your-real-name/> (both links accessed 6 June 2011).

2. In the course of moving and changing the forums under the inclusion into Battle.net in December 2010, has deleted most of the content of the old forums. Luckily, Yellow Gremlin Network has created an archive "to historically preserve the old WoW forums for the community". The original thread can now be viewed at <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25712374700&pageNo=1&sid=1> (accessed 6 June 2011).

3. The original post was located at <http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1>, but the announcement and the thread is now available at <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1&pageNo=1> (both links accessed 6 June 2011).

4. A comprehensive collection of links to discussions and reporting about Real ID throughout various sites and platforms can be found at <http://azeroth.me/2010/07/realid-linkspam/> (accessed 6 June 2011).

5. Taylor, 2006, p. 58.

6. Ricoeur, 1984, p. 45.

7. I have chosen to focus on the U.S. forums which are used and read primarily by European and North American players. There were similar threads on the European forums with similar, but less numerous responses.

8. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25712374700&sid=1&pageNo=1> (accessed 6 June 2011).

9. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25712374700&sid=1&pageNo=2233>, accessed June 6 2011.

10. A recent example would be Whiteman's (2007) study of online fan communities.

11. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=2596898727&sid=1&pageNo=179> accessed 6 June 2011.

12. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1&pageNo=1>, accessed 6 June 2011.
13. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1&pageNo=1>, accessed 6 June 2011.
14. In the midst of the heated discussions of the risks of posting real names in these two threads as well as others on the forums, a Blizzard employee known by the avatar name Bashiok posted his real name in order to prove that giving out such information would be harmless. In a matter of minutes, players had unearthed several bits of personal information about him, including his address and names of his immediate family.
15. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1&pageNo=84>, accessed 6 June 2011.
16. The page was unfortunately not preserved in the archive.
17. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1&pageNo=1>, accessed 6 June 2011.
18. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1&pageNo=84>, accessed 6 June 2011. This was quoted many times in Thread 2. I was unfortunately unable to find the original poster.
19. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1&pageNo=179>, accessed 6 June 2011.
20. A typical example of the attitude of the gaming community to Kotick's statement is the article "Activision: 'We Only Want Games We Can Exploit'. Bobby Kotick Confirms What Everyone Already Knew", at http://www.gamervision.com/users/sarah/articles/activision_we_only_want_games_we_can_exploit_, accessed 6 June 2011.
21. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25712374700&sid=1&pageNo=2233>, accessed 6 June 2011. This is another example of a widely quoted text whose original author has proven impossible to identify.
22. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1&pageNo=49>, accessed 6 June 2011.
23. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1&pageNo=3>, accessed 6 June 2011.
24. [http://www.threadmeters.com/v-DbL/My thoughts on Cataclysm difficulty/](http://www.threadmeters.com/v-DbL/My_thoughts_on_Cataclysm_difficulty/), accessed 6 June 2011.
25. According to Taylor, 2006, p. 43.
26. Taylor, 2006, p. 38.
27. Baym, 2007, p. 5.
28. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1&pageNo=33>, accessed 6 June 2011.
29. <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=136118709745171&v=wall>, accessed 6 June 2011.
30. <http://wowarchive.yg.com/thread.html?topicId=25712374700&sid=1&pageNo=2233>, accessed 6 June 2011.
31. Research has yet to indicate any significant correlations between video gaming and violence, according to the Entertainment Software Association; see [http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA EF About Games and Violence.pdf](http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_About_Games_and_Violence.pdf), accessed 6 June 2011.
32. Nardi, 2010, p. 21.
33. See Nardi, pp. 94ff.
34. Nardi, 2010, p. 120.
35. Hagström, 2008, p. 275.
36. Hagström, 2008, p. 270.
37. Taylor, 2006, p. 96.
38. Ricoeur, 1979, p. 134..
39. Bassett and O'Riordan, 2002, p. 246.
40. Bassett and O'Riordan, 2002, p. 239.

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